INSAR Website Update Announcement

The INSAR website had a makeover! Emily Mathis, INSAR Associate Administrative Director, walked the STC through the new updates. The website includes some new features and has been reorganized to make existing features easier to utilize. The most notable new element is the Global Senior Leaders Map. This interactive map, to be launched before INSAR 2021, will let users view the senior autism researchers who have been selected as representatives for their countries by the Global Senior Leaders Committee. The long-term goal is to have every country represented on the map. If you want to talk to a researcher in a given region, or are moving to a new region, this map may help you find a contact! Additionally, the INSAR Career Center has been re-organized so that the categories for available opportunities are more clear. The categories include clinical internship placement, postgraduate fellowships, postdoctoral fellowships, postdoctoral research, research assistant positions, and student fellowships/grant opportunities. As a reminder, only INSAR members can post new opportunities in the Career Center, but anyone—including non-members—can search the list.

Bio

Giorgia is a Postdoctoral Fellow working with Dr. Jan Buitelaar at Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, Radboudumc in Nijmegen, Netherlands. Her research aims to understand individual variability in autism through clinical, genetic, and neuroimaging approaches. She is currently exploring the connectivity of the amygdala with cortical areas involved in social functioning as an intermediate phenotype for autism, and more specifically, a biomarker for social functioning.

Giorgia’s preliminary findings show a differential association of genetic predisposition to autism and amygdala connectivity with social skills or adaptive functioning. She hopes that her research will inform neurobiological mechanisms underlying autism and support the development of targeted interventions. Her preliminary findings on differential associations between genetic loading and adaptive functioning vs. social behavior may expand into future research on the genetic architecture of different aspects of social functioning.

Q&A with Giorgia Bussu, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Fellow, Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition, and Behavior; Radboud University Medical Center

1. How did you become interested in your area of research?
My interest originates from personal experience. I have always felt a bit different from my peers since when I was very young – different interests, different jokes, different ways of playing, different ways of talking, different ways of interacting with each other, different ways of showing emotions, different sense of responsibilities. This made me curious about why people in general can be so different, especially in a social context. Thus, I decided to study brain functioning and its development as a basic way of understanding individual variability, with a specific focus on social functioning.

2. What is your favorite part of the research process?
I love data analysis. That is probably because of my background in Physics, but I feel more comfortable working with numbers, putting things together in order to show the hidden pattern in the data.
Giorgia Bussu Q&A continued:

3. How, if at all, has the pandemic affected your research?

First, I feel rather lucky because my research does not depend directly on data collection. However, with school closure and no helping family around, working from home while taking care of a toddler makes me less efficient and definitely more exhausted physically and mentally.

In addition, I had a collaboration exchange with Monash University in Melbourne planned for 2020 that has been cancelled because of COVID-19. Networking is also a key part of our job, and remote meetings or events cannot really replace in-person meetings. All of it leaves a higher level of uncertainty in terms of future career.

4. What have been some of your most formative professional experiences (e.g., conference experiences, networking, etc.) so far?

As a PhD candidate, I worked on a project as part of a Marie-Sklodowska-Curie International Training Network. That project involved several cross-disciplinary research groups across Europe, and provided me with the opportunity to learn about very different aspects of autism, to collaborate with researchers from different backgrounds, to present my work and get training from top experts in regular meetings at least twice a year.

I gained further international working experience in two secondments. The first was a 1.5 months secondment at the Birkbeck Center for Brain and Cognitive Development in London, where I got training on standardized clinical measures in infancy. The second was another 1.5 months secondment at a medical diagnostic corporation in Reyjavik, where I developed business awareness, and got training on machine-learning approaches for EEG/ERP data analysis.

Furthermore, I collaborated with colleagues from this European consortium to organize an international conference on autism and early brain development (ETADE Brainview Conference 2018, London, UK).

5. Who is one of your professional role models in the autism or research community and why?

My supervisor, Jan Buitelaar, is definitely my professional role model in autism research. Coming from a different background, he introduced me to the autism research field and taught me a lot as a researcher and as a person. I take him as a model for his extensive knowledge on the most diverse aspects of autism and brain development, but also for his curiosity, his way of looking at things from different perspectives, his organizational skills in managing different projects and supervising many students in parallel, and his diplomatic firmness in coordinating large international research collaborations.

International collaborations have been among Giorgia’s most formative professional experiences.

Student/Trainee Spotlight: Yulin Cheng, PhD Candidate, The University of Hong Kong

Yulin says, “This is the kind of research I would like to do: research that empowers the everyday lives of autistic people.”

Bio:

Yulin is a PhD candidate working with Dr. Prof. Paul Yip at The University of Hong Kong. Her research expands on the minority stress framework to examine the impact of structural stigma and covert forms of discrimination on the well-being of socio-demographically diverse adults on the autism spectrum. Her objective is to identify social conditions and barriers which put autistic people at greater risk of emotional distress. Yulin’s research takes an intersectional approach to explore how multiple social identities impact the experiences of minority stressors to shape mental health outcomes. Her study will employ life history narratives to explore participants’ lived experiences of discrimination, resilience, and aspirations. By employing several methods in tandem, including the use of narratives and vignettes, Yulin’s research will capture social stress not otherwise captured in traditional measures. The focus on the social environment will point to interventions at the structural level that will better support the autistic community. Guided by intersectionality, this research further seeks to address the issue of poor representation of ethnic minorities and individuals from non-Western countries in autism research by recruiting an ethnically diverse sample from the online autistic community.

Q&A:

1. How did you become interested in your area of research?

A few years ago, I came across a report on early death in autism. Then I started to read all the relevant articles on this topic and what concerned me was the pathologizing language that was being used to refer to autistic people. It kind of reflected the social environment that autistic people live in so I started to think, what effect will this have on them in the long run? This was what sparked my interest.

2. What are your future career goals?

I hope one day to be able to present my research at an INSAR conference. Moving on, I hope to have the opportunities to learn from and work with other autism researchers around the world.

3. Who is one of your professional role models in the autism or research community and why?

There are quite a few. I remembered listening to Liz Pellicano’s presentation at a conference in Australia in 2018 where she was sharing the findings of her participatory research project with autistic young people and I thought to myself then that this is the kind of research I would like to do, research that empowers the everyday lives of autistic people.

4. What do you enjoy doing outside of research?

I would happily spend a quiet day at home with my cat. I also enjoy nature and travelling, and I can’t wait to be able to travel abroad again!

Yulin hopes to learn from and work with autism researchers around the world, and hopes to present at a future INSAR conference.
Crossword Puzzle

Across:
1. Is able
4. The Bruins’ Sch.
8. In ___ mata
12. In ___ ; instead
14. Perceive via the ear
16. Abuzz, in a state of excited activity
17. Common standardized assessment used to diagnose ASD
18. The act of taking up an offer
20. State of the ___
22. Short script
23. Hard work
24. ___ __ __ borealis
25. A string of numbers, letters and symbols in a citation, used to permanently identify an online article
26. DVD forerunner
27. Punitis
28. Warship

29. Primary agency of the US gov responsible for biomedical and public health research
30. Bonfire residue
31. Famous Australian Bushranger ___ Kelly
32. “Yeah, right!”
34. Red ‘Sesame Street’ Muppet
36. Mate, pal
38. Pause in breathing
40. ___ ___ ___ Professor
44. Farewell, when repeated
45. Hence
46. Prefix with -genic, caused by a medical treatment
47. Common therapy for ASD
49. Like my doctorate
52. Environmental prefix
53. Get possession of
54. A research design helpful for examining environmental and genetic influences for traits
55. Approximately

Down:
1. Like secret missions and subgroups
2. Assist
3. A newly coined word or expression
5. Phenotypic traits
6. Instructed in a university
7. Tech. used to supplement or replace speech
8. Alternative assessment measure to the VABS
10. Prefix to -biome
11. Difficulty recognizing or describing one’s own emotions
12. ___ versus them
15. Mint money anew
16. Bowlby and Ainsworth’s ___ ___ ___ theory
19. ___ ___ ___ ___ research methods aim to shift the balance of power from researchers to stakeholders
33. Stay abreast of the news, I’ll keep ___ ___ ___ ___ the ground
35. Now broadcasting
37. Italian counterpart of the BBC
39. “Stat!”
41. Interests or benefits
42. Believe it ___
43. British Bobby
44. Pieces of work
45. NaCl
48. Yogi or Paddington
50. “Do it, ___ will”
51. Strategies to improve the visibility of a website in a search engine, abb.

Find the crossword solution on the STC webpage:
https://www.autism-insar.org/STC

Apply for the Student and Trainee Committee’s Lab Spotlight!

Would your lab like to be featured in our May 2021 newsletter? The STC seeks to highlight innovative, significant research that will benefit a wide variety of stakeholders in the autism community. The selected labs will have their research spotlighted and share their approach to research in the past year and the lab’s goals for the future with our readers. Submissions will be evaluated based on writing clarity, significance of the research, and impact of the research for a diverse set of stakeholders. Apply by March 8th at: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/STCLabSpotlightApp